

**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES, SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, RECREATION AND PUBLIC LANDS IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 2628 TO AUTHORIZE THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR TO STUDY THE SUITABILITY AND FEASIBILITY OF ESTABLISHING THE MUSCLE SHOALS NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA IN ALABAMA.**

**PRESENTED BY**

**Nancy C. Gonce**

February 7, 2002

**Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area Study Act**

Mr. Chairman, I am grateful for the opportunity to appear before the Committee on Resources, Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation and Public Lands in support of House Bill 2628 to authorize the Secretary of the Interior to study the suitability and feasibility of establishing the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area in Alabama.

My name is Nancy Gonce and I am executive director of Music Preservation Society, Inc. established in Florence, Alabama in 1982. I also serve as chair of Shoals CultureNet, a region-wide coalition of arts, business, historic preservation, and outdoor recreation organizations and agencies as well as the chair of the Cultural Affairs Committee of the Shoals Chamber of Commerce.

It has become increasingly clear that the quality of the Shoals' cultural and natural resources substantially (if not conclusively) determine plant location decisions, in-migration, small business incubation and development, retirement living, and tourism economies. These resources include the rich variety of recreation, arts, quality education, home and family life opportunities that make the Shoals one of the best places on Earth to call home.

It is important to think about cultural heritage resources in a broader context than historic places or cultural events. Cultural heritage resources are the essence of who we are. We also tend to think of cultural heritage as special events and places, religious rituals, folk arts, cuisine, holiday-making and celebrations.

In 1992 a citizens committee was organized by University of North Alabama president Robert Potts to host a conference, "Muscle Shoals Reconsidered," which was held April 22-23, 1993. The group included John Shields a TVA vice president; Steve Ainsley, publisher of the Times Daily newspaper; former Congressman Ronnie Flippo and writer/regional planner Alvin Rosenbaum, serving as conference director. The purpose was to bring together a leadership group of 250 officials and citizens to recast and reposition the Shoals for resource enhancement and protection, the promotion of tourism, plant and business formation and relocation, and retirement living. But it also sought to reintroduce, invigorate and inculcate a sense of pride among its citizens in the rich heritage of the region.

The 1993 conference served as a tremendous boost for the region, enjoying wide participation and substantial media coverage. As Robert Potts has observed, "'Muscle Shoals Reconsidered' was the catalyst that spawned our riverside and downtown beautification and redevelopment projects and reminded us of the national significance of our history." As one who attended the conference, I have observed the changes in our community with different sensibilities.

Stimulated by Muscle Shoals Reconsidered, numerous projects were launched, including downtown redevelopment efforts throughout the region, new and substantial tourism promotion activities with an expanding hotel and restaurant industry, ambitious historic preservation and landscaping initiatives, and a growing sense of pride and

progress in virtually every sector of the economy.

### **The Shoals CultureNet**

The Shoals CultureNet was organized in 1999 as an outgrowth of the "Muscle Shoals Reconsidered" to provide a strategic plan and mechanisms to link cultural heritage and quality of life assets to economic development and conservation efforts for the Muscle Shoals region.

Shoals CultureNet was organized by the Music Preservation Society. Members of the Shoals CultureNet working group initially were from the University of North Alabama, Florence-Lauderdale Tourism Board, Colbert County Visitors and Convention Bureau, Tennessee Valley Arts Association, Chamber of Commerce of the Shoals, and the business community. The committee has now expanded through partnership with the Cultural Affairs Committee of the Shoals Chamber of Commerce as well as additional arts, cultural, and community leaders. Collectively over the past decade the groups have produced the 1993 Muscle Shoals Reconsidered Conference, 1990 Economic Impact of Arts and Culture in The Shoals, 1995 Economic Impact of Arts and Culture in The Shoals, Shoals CultureNet Study 2000, and the 2002 Muscle Shoals Reconsidered II Conference.

The Shoals CultureNet has been a volunteer coalition of cultural, natural resource, business and civic groups whose purpose is to foster a planning process that is ongoing and continuous and that seeks to address issues related to the protection of its cultural heritage for the enjoyment of its citizens and visitors to the Muscle Shoals region.

The Shoals CultureNet is committed to:

protection of important and significant natural and cultural resources in the Muscle Shoals region;

development of strategies for integrative, coherent, unifying decision-making;

providing support for the appropriate allocation of community resources;

seeking determination for long term governance, roles and responsibilities of a management entity;

assure a commitment to stakeholder involvement

Awareness of the Shoals cultural heritage has made great strides over the past decade. That awareness also has identified new challenges in the global economy which must be addressed to remain competitive and to sustain growth in a manner that protects and celebrates its own unique history and sense of place.

Shoals CultureNet is a community-driven regional initiative to support quality of life strategies for enlightened and effective economic development policies which incorporate, acknowledge, and foster our cultural heritage. Its objectives include work to:

- Understand and protect basic core values of site & community
- Carry out quality development strategies
- Ensure authenticity of presentation
- Ensure protection of a sense of place
- Ensure the protection of the resources
- Provide for a high quality visitor experience
- Provide for diversification
- Balance costs & benefits

Provide for shared benefits  
Provide for local control

In order to document, quantify and identify our cultural resources the group undertook a year-long study, partially funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, published in October 2000.

Specifically, the near term recommendations of CultureNet include:

**Reconvene the region-wide conference, "Muscle Shoals Reconsidered,"** to review the successes of the past decade and develop a vision for the future. "Muscle Shoals Reconsidered" developed a regional consensus among the various stakeholders--local governments and utilities, business and industry, non-government organizations and education. It provided a common progressive agenda for cultural and natural resource protection, urban streetscape and landscape design, and better coordination among recreation, tourism, and cultural activities in the area. "Muscle Shoals Reconsidered 2002" is designed to revitalize these efforts. (This conference has been funded and organized and will take place April 7-8, 2002, partially funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts).

**Initiate an economic development** regional support program for hospitality and orientation related to industrial and business recruitment and retirement living.

**Provide continuous liaison and consultations with Rep. Bud Cramer's legislative initiative for a Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area Study,** which was introduced in the 107th Congress for authorization and funding in the FY2003 budget cycle. Consultations with the National Park Service, Alabama Historical Commission, Alabama Department of Transportation, Alabama Council on the Arts, TVA and other interest stakeholders have taken place.

**Advance the Shoals CultureNet Community Calendar Project** in partnerships with the Shoals Chamber of Commerce, arts and cultural organizations, tourism, historical, business and economic development agencies and individuals. Our study identified almost two dozen regionally and nationally significant festivals and events which take place annually in The Shoals from the production of "The Miracle Worker" on the grounds of Helen Keller's home, to the W.C. Handy Music Festival, to annual commemorations of Native American culture and events.

Recent strides made in the Shoals' cultural development are having a great impact even as they often go unnoticed. Consider, for instance, a recent study by Cognetics, a highly respected economic development research firm based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Cognetics reported that of the 25 rural areas in the US with the strongest increases in new young white-collar worker and retiree migration, *northern rural Alabama ranked first* (with the regions surrounding the Shoals--northern Mississippi and east and west rural Tennessee--also appearing on the top 25 list). We learned from other studies that the principle attractions that create these increases are upgraded environmental quality, nearby recreation, safety and security, high-quality cultural, medical, and education institutions, and reduced living costs and taxes.

While the rate of increase in some indicators in the region, such as retail sales and population in-migration, has been dramatic, planning, conservation, and facilities to sustain our region's assets and to maintain this momentum requires sustained efforts to develop. We will seek ways to protect, integrate, and celebrate those cultural, heritage and recreational attractions that produce new energy, and expand payrolls and spending. These attributes that will make the Shoals increasingly competitive in the world economy and to regain its identity as a place of notional significance. Franklin Roosevelt called the Muscle Shoals region "the Genesis of a New America."

Among its many goals Shoals CultureNet seeks to:

**Preserve important and historic cultural resources** of the Muscle Shoals region, comprising Lauderdale and Colbert counties and relevant communities in Franklin and Lawrence counties. These efforts include the identification, acquisition, classification, and preservation/documentation of these resources, including historic documents and papers, manuscripts, objects, business records, advertising, ephemera, film and photography. Our study identified more than 100 people who have roots in the Muscle Shoals area who have influenced the direction of American life for the past centuries and who continue to influence American culture in the new century. In Florence alone there are eight historic districts which include approximately 450 structures that are on the National Register of Historic Places and additional areas/structures which are included in the Alabama Register. Additional information will be presented by other witnesses focusing on historically significant elements of the National Heritage Area Study.

**Develop programs and cooperative relationships** among local governments, public-private partnerships, and non-government organizations to enhance and promote these cultural resources, including cooperation with tourism promotion and business development initiatives. Integrate these objectives with curriculum, programs and policies. Our study identified almost 200 potential participants in both short-term and long-range project development.

**Provide strategies to sustain ongoing operations that meet these objectives.** A study of Muscle Shoals heritage assets and strategies should outline a long-range plan and strategy on acquisition, staffing, access, sustainability, and links to other organizations and that will include governance options, capital and operational funding requirements, programming objectives, outreach, roles and responsibilities, timeline, and milestones for the project.

A successful Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area Study should include support for and demonstrations of substantial public participation in visioning and planning in preparation for a national designation. This includes recognition and acceptance of the salient themes of the study, which, prospectively, may include regional and related Alabama and Southern studies and narrative histories in archeology, music, folklore and folkways, public works and agriculture, with each presented within the contextual framework of the Tennessee River at Muscle Shoals.

In addition to these historical studies, this planning process, which is ongoing and continuous, seeks to address:

- Strategies for integrative, coherent, and unifying decision-making
- Clarification of allocation of community resources
- Determination of governance, roles and responsibilities
- Commitment to partnerships
- Organizational stability and sustained operations

The principle assets of the Shoals area have been inventoried and are increasingly well-known to those with interests in cultural heritage and recreational opportunities in the Southeast. But the potential for optimization of these assets is through coalition- building, community awareness, planning, and political support to advance place-enhancing quality of life strategies with tourism and other compatible economic development enterprises. Our strategic planning and evaluation has led us to this opportunity to seek National Heritage Area Status.

I urge you to support House Bill 2628 to authorize the Secretary of the Interior to study the suitability and feasibility of establishing the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area in Alabama. In the Shoals area we have a working group of enthusiastic volunteers, professionals, and experts ready to welcome and facilitate National Park Service personnel and their colleagues in the conduct of this study.

####